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TAGS: [PREF PHUM KTIP SMIG TH BM](#)
SUBJECT: ROHINGYA BOAT PEOPLE: THAI GOVERNMENT MEETS
UNHCR, ACCESS MULLED

REF: BANGKOK 165

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, Reasons 1.4 (B+D)

11. (C/NF) Summary: On January 29th, UNHCR Regional Representative Raymond Hall met with FM Kasit in a meeting Hall described to us as "positive overall." The encounter, heavily covered by local media, was the first direct meeting by UNHCR with Thai officials on the Rohingyas issue. After hearing UNHCR concerns regarding the reported abuse of Rohingyas boat people by Thai security forces, FM Kasit responded by promising a "full investigation" and emphasizing the regional dimension of any comprehensive solution to the Rohingyas migrant issue. Our own discussions with local military commanders and villagers suggests that the pushback policy initiative may have been taken by the local ISOC Army Colonel in command and carried out by adhoc civilian groups comprised of local island fishing villagers and unidentified deep sea fishing trawlers. UNHCR has not yet gained access to the latest batch of Rohingyas detained in Ranong, pending a decision by the RTG interagency process.

12. (C) Comment: It was not clear to Hall from FM Kasit's description if this proposed regional consultation, clearly in the early mulling-over stages, would be under the ASEAN banner or any other existing regional grouping. Kasit suggested that UNHCR might co-chair a "regional consultation" that would include India, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. UNHCR will engage Kasit on the Rohingyas boat people issue again February 2 in Geneva, where Kasit will meet with High Commissioner Antonio Guterres. End Summary and Comment.

Thai FM and UNHCR regional rep meet

13. (C/NF) In his January 29 meeting with UNHCR Regional rep Raymond Hall, FM Kasit promised a "full investigation" into the alleged mistreatment of Rohingya but did not provide a detailed explanation of what occurred during the reported push-outs to sea, pending the investigation, Hall told us afterwards. Kasit indicated MFA support for UNHCR's immediate request to meet with 78 Rohingyas boat people brought to the southern port of Ranong on January 28th, but suggested the Royal Thai Army had reservations, and some time might be required to reach a formal RTG position. An interagency committee met on the afternoon of January 29 to discuss the issue, with results not known as of COB.

UNHCR's preferred way forward

14. (C/NF) UNHCR's Hall suggested to FM Kasit that a multi-lateral regional approach to the Burmese regime would be needed to stabilize UNHCR's "political space" to operate in Northern Rakhine State, the origin of the Rohingyas boat

people. UNHCR's 16-year presence there, recently weakened by Burmese authorities, is needed to ensure Hall's preferred solution to the issue: voluntary return of Rohingyas to Burma under conditions of safety. In UNHCR's view, such a return would have to occur under two basic conditions: a Burmese commitment to no punishment for the Rohingyas' departure, and commitment to the right for returnees to be reinstated in local family lists, a necessary step for legal presence. Without a continued (and unfettered) UNHCR monitoring presence in Northern Rakhine State, Hall believed a voluntary return would be impossible, as the Rohingyas would not trust Burmese government guarantees on the two fundamental conditions.

UNHCR seeking access in Ranong to latest batch

15. (C/NF) UNHCR's deputy regional representative arrived in Ranong on January 28 seeking access to the latest detainees; local immigration police told him to wait for the Bangkok decision. Access to the group would be an important precedent for a continued UNHCR role in future boat arrivals, which are expected until the advent of the monsoon in May/June. UNHCR told us that they do not propose to conduct comprehensive refugee status determinations of arriving Rohingyas, but limited interviews to determine nationality and protection needs. The adults in the latest group of arrivals (66 total) have been sentenced to five days imprisonment and deportation to Burma on February 3rd. They are currently in a Ranong jail, while 12 minors who also arrived via boat are detained in the Ranong immigration detention center. Several people who received medical treatment for exposure have been released from the hospital.

Actors in the Rohingya landings/pushbacks

16. (SBU) The Rohingya issue has received widespread publicity in recent weeks; media reports have referenced a range of Thai security forces as allegedly involved in the Rohingya maritime pushback. RefCoord visited the Ranong area and engaged both military commanders and local villagers (reftel). The discussion with villagers who admitted participating in Rohingya-related activities suggests two loosely defined civilian groupings of unpaid volunteers were involved in the mistreatment of the Rohingyas.

-- The first group was identified as a Villager Security Unit (in Thai: Chut Raksaa Kwamplodpai Muu Baan). This group of unpaid volunteers numbered approximately thirty people on Koh Payam. These volunteer units are found primarily in remote areas of Thailand where there is limited police or military presence. These volunteers are organized under the Ministry of Interior and are supervised by the local district chief. Their primary responsibility is to guard villages and other facilities.

-- Many members of the Village Security Unit in Ranong were also members of Thai Volunteers for Protection of the Nation (in Thai: Thai Assyai Ponggan Chaat). These are also unpaid volunteers; there were 111 members in the Ranong area. The local Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) reportedly provided five weapons and three days of semi-annual training to these volunteers.

17. (SBU) Both the Village Security Unit and the Thai Volunteers for Protection of the Nation were involved in the response to the Rohingyas landings in and around Ranong, based on their own admissions. The leaders of the groups told RefCoord that reimbursement for their expenses involved in dealing with the Rohingyas (providing food and water while detained on the beach, repairing boats) had become a sensitive issue; they complained that ISOC only partially defrayed expenses.

JOHN